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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 000659

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SUBJECT: INTERIOR MINISTER SURVIVES VOTE OF NO CONFIDENCE

REF: KUWAIT 623

Classified By: A/DCM Pete O'Donohue for reasons 1.4 b and d

11. (C) In what amounts to a stinging rebuke to tribalist opposition members of parliament, Interior Minister Shaykh Jaber Al-Khaled Al Sabah survived a vote of no confidence July 1 by a convincing 30 to 16 votes, with two abstentions and one absence. The vote came in response to a motion filed by MP Musallam Al-Barrak, a notable tribalist provocateur, who charged the Minister with a variety of offenses including responsibility for the improper awarding of a KD 5 million contract (approximately USD 17.5 million) to erect billboards for candidates in the May 2008 election, failure to enforce the election law by not arresting a Kuwaiti who was filmed allegedly offering money to persons in an attempt to convince them to register as candidates in Kuwait's third district and, finally, with having installed a camera in a park across from the National Assembly allegedly to "spy" on MPS. As reported reftel, the Minister and his accuser presented their respective cases before the Parliament during a June 23 interpellation or "grilling" in local parlance.

12. (C) In accordance with set parliamentary procedures, the July 1 vote followed a final presentation of arguments both by MPs who supported the motion against the Minister and by MPs who opposed it. While the initial intent was for two MPs to speak on behalf of the Minister and two to present the case against him, Speaker Jassem Al-Kharafi allowed a vote to determine whether an additional two MPs would be allowed to speak for and against the Minister; the vote carried.

13. (C) During the initial round of 15-minute presentations, MPs Ghanem Al-Mai (generally pro-government) and Mubarak Al-Wa'lan (Independent) argued for the motion to remove the Minister and Sayid Hussein Al-Quallaf (Independent Shia) and Shuaib Al-Mowaizri (pro-government) argued against the motion. In a pair of rambling discourses, the pro-removal MPs largely reiterated charges that the Minister bore responsibility for permitting the misuse of public funds or, at the very least, for failing to launch an investigation into the misuse of funds. In an equally rambling rebuttal that went overtime and drew laughter and catcalls, Sayid Hussein Al-Quallaf asserted the Minister's non-culpability and argued that the real victim of the no confidence motion is Kuwait, which is being diverted from more important issues. Shuaib Al-Mowaizri also defended the Minister's character, noting that he had had numerous opportunities to steal during his long government career and had never done so. Like Al-Quallaf, Al-Mowaizri asserted that the effort to bring down Shaykh Jaber was harming Kuwait and dividing Kuwaitis and that it was important to move on to bigger, more serious issues.

14. (C) The vote to allow two additional presenters, which followed the initial four presentations, brought Dr. Dhaifallah Bou Ramya (Independent Islamist) to the podium to argue for the Minister's removal and Dr. Rola Dashti -- one of Kuwait's four newly-elected women MPs -- to defend him. Like his colleagues, Bou Ramya repeated charges that the Minister bore responsibility for the misuse of public funds,

without offering any new evidence or arguments, and also repeated the allegation that the Minister was responsible for "spying" on MPs, a violation that had once brought down "the President of the greatest country in the world" (an apparent reference to President Nixon and Watergate). Dashti, in turn, dressed in red in stark contrast to the sea of white male dishdashas, offered the least bombastic speech of the day, urging her compatriots to focus on cooperation and move forward. Regarding the corruption charge, Dashti noted that the Minister, at very least, had referred the case to the public prosecution; regarding the spying charge, she noted that the square in front of the National Assembly remains a "venue for the freedom of expression," notwithstanding the installation of cameras.

15. (C) Soon after Dashti's presentation Speaker Al-Kharafi called for a voice vote and, in short-order, it was clear that the Minister - and the government -- had won an important victory. Supporters of the Minister -- who sat grim-faced throughout the proceedings -- immediately leapt to their feet in a standing ovation while supporters of Musallam Al-Barrak, who had crowded into an upper gallery, also leapt to their feet, chanting and lauding his effort to challenge the government and criticizing those MPs who had accused him of tribalist motivations. In very brief post-vote comments, the Interior Minister thanked the assembled MPs for their efforts and noted that all of the MPs were united in their common support for Kuwait. For his part, Al-Barrak told the audience there was "nothing tribal" about his motion to grill the Minister, noting that eleven of those MPs who supported the Minister were tribalists. "We are for national unity," he concluded.

16. (C) Comment: The Interior Minister's victory is not just

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a chastening to the tribalists and their Islamist colleagues, it is also a very welcome shot in the arm for a beleaguered government. With the interpellation and no confidence vote safely behind it, the government can reasonably conclude that some of the zip has gone out of the opposition machinery and that further serious interpellation motions are unlikely for the near term, including those threatened against the Prime Minister. With its victory in the bag and parliament close to summer recess, the government can, perhaps, look forward to preparing an agenda that focuses on some of the major issues it faces, including economic reform. The Interior Minister's continuation in office also enhances our prospect of moving forward on a number of bilateral issues, including counter-terrorism, resolution of the issue of Kuwait's Guantanamo detainees, and TIP. On a peripheral note, the star of the day was clearly Dr. Rola Dashti, whose stylish demeanor and temperate remarks made her stand out from her windier, less focused colleagues.

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